

Quality Education



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“Education is that which remains when one has forgotten everything he learned in school.” This purported remarks of Albert Einstein’s made me stop and think when it caught my eye in the newspaper recently. Just what is it we are trying to achieve in our institutions of higher learning and how well are we achieving it? Einstein’s somewhat cynical remark insinuates that educational institutions inhibit learning. Perhaps that was true in his case, but, if so, I think Einstein is the exception that proves the rule of what educational institutions strive to be. Our goal is to provide the environment and the opportunity for as much “learning” to go on as possible.

During the twenty-plus years since I first came to Korea, Korea has made great strides in the educational arena. Educational standards have risen, the numbers of people being educated have increased dramatically, the number of professors with excellent credentials has grown remarkably, the amount and quality of science equipment in university laboratories has expanded significantly, library facilities have likewise grown considerably. This is just a brief summary of the advances that we all know about; many more could be cited. With these advances there is no doubt that more learning is possible, and that more learning is actually being achieved.

Still there is more to achieve. I would like to make a comparison with Korea’s so-called “economic miracle.” In the past twenty years or so Korea has learned how to be a major exporting nation in the world. Yet I recently noticed the following headline in *Korea News-review*: “Upgrading Quality of ROK Products Highest Priority.” In a similar way, while Korea has made significant advances in the educational area, still we are striving to grow to offer a more quality education. We might say “Upgrading Quality of ROK Education Highest Priority.” Growth in the quality of education is the challenge Korea’s educational institutions face. This challenge is not only Korea’s, but also countries with longer histories in formal education. We need only cite the report “A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform” issued by The National Commission on Excellence in Education in the United States as an example of how other countries also face crises in the quality of their educational system.

Korea might be looked upon as on the threshold of entering the international educational community. This means Korea is striving to achieve recognition in the worldwide educational community. This means that Korea will have institutions of higher learning whose graduates can compete favorably with students at universities anywhere in the world. This means that Korea's universities and especially the faculties in these universities will be of such a quality that graduate students from other countries would want to come to Korea to study because of this eminence. This means that Korean universities will actively participate with universities of other countries in joint interdisciplinary research programs and student and faculty exchange.

Some might say this is too high an ideal considering the problems that Korea has, being a relatively small country with a minor language compared to other countries in the world. To me that simply means that there are the concrete problems Korea has to face in striving to achieve educational excellence. Without this goal, Korea will not continue to make the remarkable advances it has made since Liberation in 1945. When we think of the problems that faced the Korean educational picture at the end of the Japanese occupation, present problems are not so difficult after all.

There are several major areas of concern as Korea moves into the next stage of its educational development. Here I would like to point out a few I have noticed, especially since I have become involved in educational administration.

What comes to mind, first of all, is the complex of problems that has come about due to the dramatic increase in student numbers starting in 1981. To cite the figures for my own institution, Sogang University, we have experienced a 270% increase in student numbers over the past four years. Our freshman quota has risen from 660 (1980) to 1768 (1981). The consequences from this are many. We need more faculty, more classrooms, more books, more library and laboratory facilities, more dining space. The list is endless. While our student population has grown 270% over the past four years, our full-time faculty has increased only by about 50%. It is difficult to find professors when every university and college in the country is also looking for new faculty because of the same shortage.

Another consequence is the quality of the students that are presently in the university. With such an increase in student numbers (I suppose around 200% in the country as a whole), it is inevitable that the student population is not the elite it was before. Granted improvement in high school education, still such a large increase in students cannot but influence the overall quality of university students. It may be that in the long run this is a good policy. It may force the universities to keep upgrading their education so that eventually the overall quality is improved. However, in the meantime there are many elements that militate against quality education in our schools: a higher student-faculty ratio means larger classes, more impersonal classes, less time for students by professors, less time to spend correcting homework, more difficulties in giving subjective-type examination. Faculty have less time in which to engage in research which is essential for growth in quality to occur. There is less space for each student in libraries. And the list goes on.

Theoretically, the graduation quota is supposed to solve this problem by weeding out the lower 30% of the students before graduation. Many things could be said about the graduation quota, but here I have just a couple of remarks. This system seems to have an undesirable effect on students. There is a greater tension among the students: the atmosphere is more competitive, more impersonal; greater numbers mean it is more difficult for students to get to know one another; students are reluctant to lend one another their notes

and to study together (one student's success means reduced chances for another's success). Education should be a freeing experience, helping the students to become more human. Over the long run, I think it is questionable whether such an atmosphere is conducive to quality education.

Because of adverse social pressure on this graduation quota system, some adjustments have been made, like allowing 5-7% in addition to the graduation quota to be awarded a *suryo ch'ung* (certificate) rather than a diploma, by allowing graduation outside of quota after six or seven semesters for brighter students. While these methods may alleviate the problem somewhat, they do not solve it. Moreover, a more fundamental question has to be asked whether such adjustments are consistent with the desire and need to improve the quality of education in this country. It seems to me each educational institution must be held responsible to uphold its own standards. Ultimately competition among the educational institutions will benefit the quality of education in all of them.

Having just finished the process of admitting new freshmen into our university, I cannot but mention problems connected with the entrance procedure. A system where the student's choice of university or department within that university often has little correlation with his talents or his desires for future way of life or employment means that the university is spending much time and effort to educate young people in fields that do not give as much promise for quality growth in the future. The graduation quota equivalently prohibits students from being able to change to a department more in keeping with their talents (places are available only in terms of graduation, not entrance quotas). The consequence at entrance time is a casino-type atmosphere. Anyone who has witnessed the scene of students submitting their college application papers will have noticed the similarity to roulette: "Which department seems to have the lowest ratio?" "Just so I get into the university—I don't care what department." However, the students *do* care after a year or two in school. The competitive factor so dominates the process that one wonders how much consideration of educational objectives went into the theory behind the system.

There is another more basic question that being asked these days: How much validity does the College Qualifying Examination have? Over the past two years at Sogang University we have made studies on the correlation between College Qualifying Examination scores and the students' college grades. The results show no significant correspondence between the College Qualifying Examination score and college grades or high school grades. Rather we have found more correspondence between our college grades and a combination of the College Qualifying Examination scores *and* high school grades together. What this seems to mean is the College Qualifying Examination needs more subjective input. It is difficult to come up with an objective-type examination whose results truly reflect the ability of the student. To make most everything depend on one day's performance does not seem to be validated by our studies. What is the Solution? This is the difficult question. I feel that an examination by the college or university in question of its own prospective students would allow for another independent evaluation of the student. I feel that high school achievement should also be reflected in the entrance procedure. Also a more meaningful interview with each student would be desirable.

I have pointed out some concrete problems that are present in Korea's higher education. These are problems I feel must be faced if Korea is to continue to make advances in the quality of the education it offers. The fact of problems is not in itself a problem. The problem is when we fail to face them. *